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ABSTRACT

Various changes have swept across California's system of education over the past few years--tax limitations, equity of spending allocations, declining enrollment, and mainstreaming, to mention a few. Interviews with 104 educators conducted in 1978-79 in the San Jose Unified School District revealed how those at all levels of a local school system felt about the impact on education of these social and economic changes. The results showed considerable concern, highlighted by a sense that the public was altogether unhappy with the performance of local schools. Teachers and administrators reported that they were working harder than ever, under worsening conditions and for fewer rewards. Many teachers indicated plans to leave the profession. Major responsibility for the situation was attributed to reductions in funding due to passage of Proposition 13, and additionally to poor public attitudes toward education. The findings point to the importance of close monitoring of the perceptions and attitudes of local school staff in California and elsewhere. (Author/PGD)

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PERCEIVED CHANGES IN CALIFORNIA SCHOOLS AND CLASSROOMS

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January 1980

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PERCEIVED CHANGES IN CALIFORNIA SCHOOLS

Abstract

Various changes have swept across California education over the past few years--tax limitations, equity of spending allocations, declining enrollment, and mainstreaming, to mention a few. Interviews were carried out in one school district to learn about the perceptions of change at various levels of the local school system. The results showed considerable concern, highlighted by a sense that the public was altogether unhappy with the performance of local schools. Teachers and administrators reported that they were responding to this challenge in a professional manner. However, many teachers and a few administrators reported plans to leave the profession in one way or another. The findings point to the importance of close monitoring of the perceptions and attitudes of local school staffs in California, and elsewhere in the country.

PERCEIVED CHANGES IN CALIFORNIA SCHOOLS AND CLASSROOMS

Robert C. Calfee and Gloria Pessirilo-Jurisic

Stanford University

Introduction: Background and Purpose of Study

Background of Study

In the Spring of 1978, the attention of the entire nation was drawn to California and the struggle over Proposition 13. The brain-child of Howard Jarvis and Paul Gann, it was ostensibly a property tax limitation initiative. It called for a limit of one percent on real property texes, restricted the level of assessment on property, and prohibited the State Legislature from levying statewide replacement property taxes. The initiative came before the voters at a time of widespread public frustration with inflation and government spending--it passed by an overwhelming margin, with the result that there was an immediate $7 billion reduction in local revenues. The loss in taxes affected city and county services, police and fire protection, swimming pools and state parks, community health services, and so on. However, the most widespread impact was on California schools. Districts had derived at least 50 percent of their support from the local property taxes; and the local school boards had the chief responsibility for levying taxes, for deciding on their distribution, and for determining the nature and effectiveness of the local education program, including summer school, adult education and athletic events, among others.

With the passage of Proposition 13, important decision-making tasks confronted legislators, economists, and political scientists. An immediate question was how to prevent the radical shift in educational program implied

by a 50 percent drop in the local funds, which accounted for about two-thirds of the total school budget. During the Summer of 1978, the State Legislature committed to public schools about $2.1 billion in State surplus funds to fill the gap for the 1978-79 school year. Every school district in the State was guaranteed at least 85 percent of 1977-78 funding, and some districts received State funding at a level equal to their 1977-78 budget. The economic threat to public schools was averted for the moment, and the disaster that many had predicted did not come about that school year.

Public schools in California opened on schedule in the Fall of 1978, contrary to dismal prediction. But the atmosphere was one of uncertainty and distress. The State had bailed out public education for the 1978-79 school year, but the future was still unsettled. In the summer of 1979, a three-year bailout bill was passed, giving schools a brief respite. The long-range prospects for school funding and governance remained uncertain.

The atmosphere of uncertainty and distress is even darker when Proposition 13 is viewed in light of other problems confronting educators. Assembly Bill 65, the State's response to the Serrano-Priest decision, called for equity in school financing. The intention of this legislation was to achieve a gradual "leveling-up" of school financing over a number of years, with the goal of moving the less well funded districts in the State closer to the level of the higher funded districts. In the face of Proposition 13 and depleted surplus funds, however, equity could be realized only through a general leveling-down in the financing of public education.

Another feature of significance in the California educational environment is declining enrollment. Like many other states, California is experiencing the results of the decreased birthrate of the 60s and 70s. Proposition 13 caught many districts off balance--already at a high level of per student

spending because of resistance to change in the face of declining enrollment, suddenly they were forced to make immediate and very substantial cuts in the level of support.

At about the same time, the State and Federal legislation for children with special needs (Public Law 94-142) was in the process of being implemented. This legislation was intended to place greater responsibility for the education of handicapped children at the local school or classroom level. With adequate support for proper implementation, the program might have proven a benefit; without adequate support, it became an additional burden.

Finally, we can mention California's struggle with public complaints about declining achievement, integration, and other social issues. All of these added to educators' feelings of uncertainty and distress about the future.

Purpose of Study

During the next few years, the State will continue to be faced with decisions about the future funding of schools and issues of governance. Yet little or no attention has been given to the people and organizations most directly affected by all of these activities--the local school, the administrators, teachers, pupils, and families at the local school. Many of these people are upset about what is happening--of this there can be little doubt. Actual strikes have been rare, but work slow-downs have not been uncommon, and the sense of many observers is that the morale is at an all time low.

How do principals and teachers perceive the impact of Proposition 13 and other events on their schools and classrooms? What is the effect of these perceptions on their attitudes toward their role as educators? What organizational changes are being proposed in planning instructional strate-

gies? How well are teachers able to implement these changes in their classrooms?

These questions were the focus of the project. We attempted to study the effects on principals, teachers, and administrators of Proposition 13 and other changes in the support for education in California public schools. We were especially interested in the impact on administrator and teacher perceptions, on the climate of the school and classroom, and on methods of changing and implementing instruction. The interviews were carried out during the 1978-79 school year. However, given the continuing uncertainty about school funding, we suspect that the situation is much the same at present. The interviews were limited to the San Jose Unified School District--other districts probably face somewhat different problems, but we suspect that San Jose is fairly typical. In any event, we feel that the evidence we have obtained provides some insight into the nature of declining morale among public school teachers in California.

Sample Selection and Data Collection

Sample Selection

Individuals interviewed in the study were selected from ten schools and the central office in the San Jose Unified School District. The schools include four elementary schools, four junior high schools, and two senior high schools.

The City of San Jose, located approximately 25 miles south of Stanford University (and about 55 miles south of San Francisco), was selected as the site of this study. Considered one of the fastest growing communities in the San Francisco Bay Area, San Jose currently has a population in excess of

550,000. The students in the San Jose Unified School District represent a wide range of ethnicity--28 percent have a Spanish surname, 67 percent are other White. 1.7 percent are Black, and 2.1 percent are Asian. The distribution of the Spanish surname minority is quite uneven throughout the District--12 elementary schools have in excess of 50 percent Spanish surname enrollment, and 16 have less than 10 percent. These figures mirror neighborhood patterns.

The San Jose Unifed School District is widely diverse; the central city schools serve a disadvantaged population, while the southern end of the District consists of middle-income families. Most of our interviewees were from the central city. These schools were hit hardest by reallocation following the passage of Proposition 13, and were quite interested in expressing their point of view.

Initial contact was made with the principals of the participating schools. In each case an interview was arranged and principals were asked for their assistance in arranging interviews with vice-principals and teachers. We asked for eight teachers from each elementary school and twelve teachers from each of the junior and senior high schools. The larger number of teachers at the secondary level is due to the greater diversity in instructional programs and teacher responsibilities.

The method of selecting teachers for interviews varied somewhat among schools, depending upon how the principal decided to handle our request. In one school we were allowed to select teachers from a school list. Teachers were then approached and all agreed to be interviewed. In some schools, principals posted sign-up sheets asking teachers to volunteer for the interviews. In others we were simply given the names of teachers without knowing how they were selected, or interviewers personally approached

teachers in hallways, lunchrooms, etc., and asked for their cooperation. All in all, the selection process cannot be described as random. All of the teachers chosen for interview had been at the school at least one year prior to September 1978, and in most instances at the same grade level.

The district superintendent was also contacted and, with his advice, six administrators at the central office were selected.

The final sample included 81 teachers, 17 principals and vice-principals, and 6 administrators.

Data Collection

We conducted on-site interviews with all participants. The interviews were structured and lasted approximately one hour. Interviews for administrators, principals, and teachers followed a parallel format. We posed the same basic questions in all cases, but the focus of the questions was altered as necessary to fit the particular perspectives of those being interviewed.

The format started with a fairly general question about perceived changes in California education. This was followed by four questions which focused attention on specific areas thought to be affected by and responsible for change. The questions were as follows:

Question 1. What have been the most important changes <u>for you</u> from last year to this year? These changes can be at any level--classroom, school, district, state, and so on.

Question 2. In your opinion, where, if anywhere, have there been changes this year in the resources that help you in your job? We're thinking of resources like people, programs, supplies, equipment, and so on.

Question 3. This year, compared with last, what changes have occurred in your instructional program (and the demands of your job), and how are these related to changes in resources and services?

Question 4. Until now we've been focusing on the classroom. Taking a broader perspective, what have been the major events in the state, the nation, or your district that have had an impact on your school and classroom? By events we mean such things as public opinion, funding and control of education, changes in living conditions and lifestyle, and so on.

Question 5. Finally, what do you think may be the long-range effects of all the things we've been talking about--on you, on the school, on the students, . . .?

Question 1 and the other four questions also differed in the way they were handled. Question 1 was treated as completely open-ended and responses were recorded verbatim. For Questions 2 through 5, we used a three-level process of questioning. In the first level we asked the question and recorded the individual's spontaneous responses. In the second level of questioning, we probed for perception of change by elaborating a number of specific questions. For example, in Question 2 regarding resources available on the job, we asked the individual about perceived change in certificated staff, classified staff, inservice programs, supplies and equipment, and ancillary services. A list of items enumerated for each of these specific areas was used during the third and final level of questioning which consisted of very detailed probes (Table 1). Thus for each question in 2 through 5, the interviewer used a system of progressively refined probes to obtain information before proceeding to the next question.

Table 1

List of Items Used in Third Level
of Questioning for Resources Question

Professional/Certificated People	Programs/Inservice, etc.
Classroom teachers	Alternative programs
Administrators	Categorical programs
Resource teachers	Summer programs
Consultants/Specialists	Conferences
Psychologists	Released time
Counselors	Inservice training
[illegible]	
[illegible]	Supplies/Equipment
Classified/Uncertificated People	Textbooks
	Paper, pencils, etc.
Classroom aides	Audio-visual
Playground/recess aides	Supplementary materials
Clerical staff	Laboratories
Custodial staff	Library materials
Nurse	
Maintenance	Ancillary Services
	Police/Fire
	Health services
	Parent participation

Data Analysis and Findings

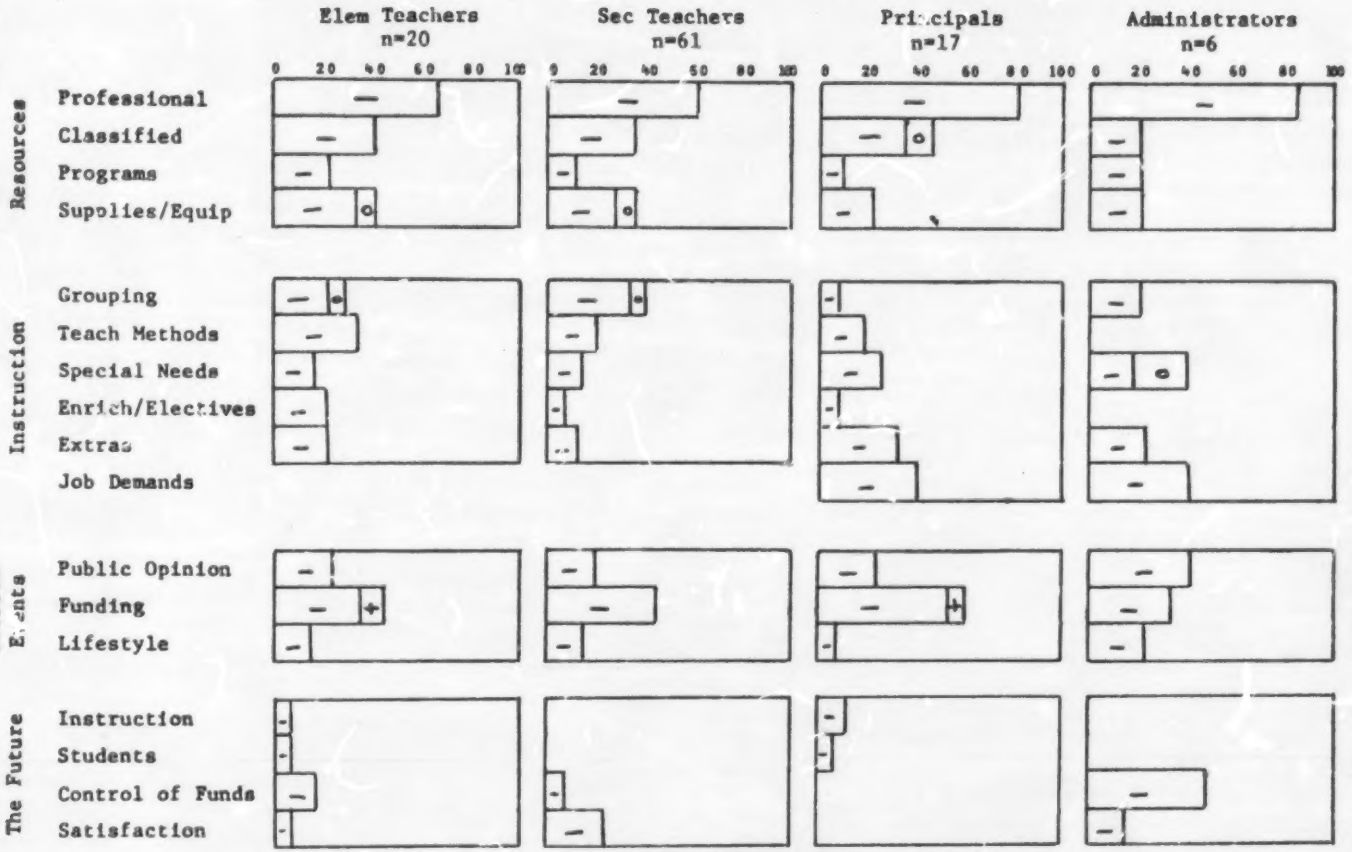
Data Analysis

Our primary objective in the present study was to measure the impact of state and national events on the perceptions, attitudes and expectations of California educators. The format of the interview made it easy to extract summary descriptions about perceptions (Questions 1 - 4) and expectations (Question 5) by means of a simple tally of the number of individuals mentioning specific issues during the interview. Analysis of recorded comments made by interviewees yielded an additional measure for "attitude toward change." Thus, when change was perceived, it could be viewed as positive, negative, or neutral. We then converted these tallies into percentages for purposes of comparison, since the size of the four groups differed.

Findings

The findings from the interview questions are reported in the following pages. We have presented them graphically, indicating the areas of perceived change and attitude toward change for each of the groups of educators interviewed. On page 9, the results for Question 1 are shown. A horizontal glance across a graph provides a comparison over groups. We can see which areas are of general concern to different educators and where perceptions vary. By glancing down a figure, we can compare the concerns of any single group over the variety of topics.

Question 1. What have been the most important changes <u>for you</u> from last year to this year? These changes can be at any level--classroom, school, district, state, and so on.



Question 1. What have been the most important changes for you from last year to this year? These changes can be at any level--classroom, school, district, state, and so on.

Total San Jose school sample 1978-1979 (indicates responses 5% and above)

Perceived Changes
10/79 Calfee/Pessirilo-Jurisic

— Negative effects
o Neutral effects
+ Positive effects

The area of perceived change mentioned most often was professional personnel (62%). This was followed by funding (44%), classified personnel (40%), grouping (specifically, increase in class size), and supplies and equipment (both 32%). Looking across the page, teachers, principals, and administrators all mentioned a negative change in professional personnel and funding. Not surprisingly, the negative change in funding mentioned most often was a reduction in funds due to Proposition 13.

Increasing dissatisfaction and loss of classroom teachers were cited most often under professional help. Also mentioned was reduced time spent in schools by resource teachers and specialists. Of those working in the schools--teachers and principals--a large percentage viewed the loss of classified personnel as a major problem. This is understandable since the reduction of classroom aides, clerical staff, and custodial help leads directly to increased work load and dirtier schools. A perceived reduction in supplies and equipment, on the other hand, was primarily a problem for teachers. Looking down the graph, you can see the concerns for each group ranked in order of importance.

Elem. Teachers	Sec. Teachers	Principals	Administrators
1. Professional	1. Professional	1. Professional	1. Professional
2. Classified	2. Grouping	2. Funding	2. Public opinion Public funding
3. Funding	3. Funding	3. Classified	
4. Supplies/ Equipment	4. Classified		
	5. Supplies/ Equipment		

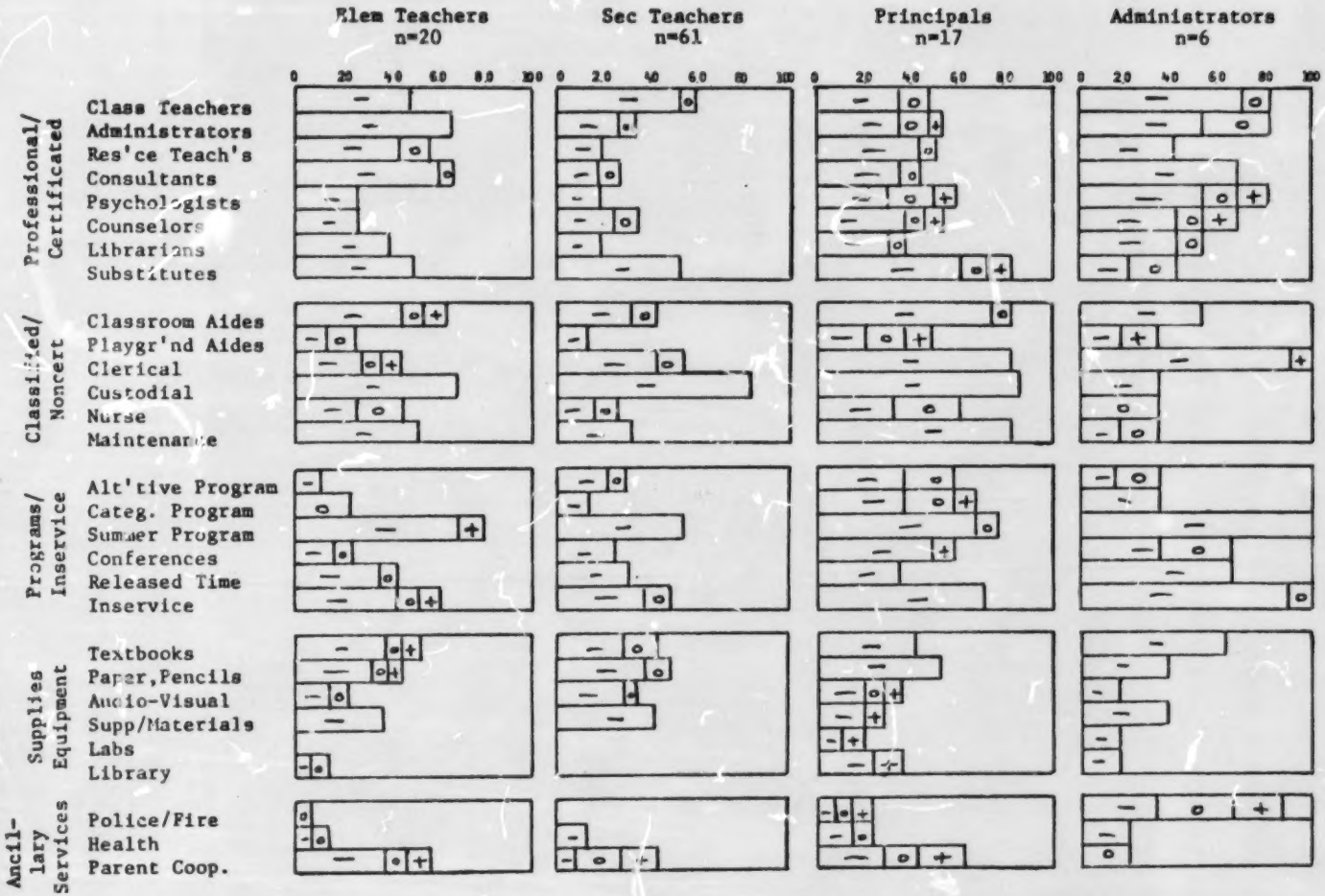
Since Question 1 was totally open-ended, it is interesting to note that of all changes mentioned, 90 percent were viewed as negative. Also, although the questions specifically asked about changes during the past year, 7 percent of the responses referred to the future.

Question 2. In your opinion, where, if anywhere, have there been changes this year in the resources that help you in your job? We're thinking of resources like people, programs, supplies, equipment, and so on.

"People" represent the area of greatest change for our four groups of educators (page 12). Changes mentioned most often were custodial staff (74%), classroom teachers and clerical staff (57%), substitutes (56%), classroom aides (53%), administrators (43%), and maintenance personnel (41%). Since the changes normally meant a reduction in personnel or time for each of these areas, attitude toward change was clearly negative.

Of those interviewed, teachers, principals, and vice-principals at both the primary and secondary levels were particularly concerned about the reduction in custodial service. Such services were among the first to be cut and, according to the verbatim reports of interviewees, the situation in the schools became progressively worse over the year. A number of teachers were bringing their own brooms to school, cleaning their own rooms, and scouring bathrooms. Such activities, while necessary for survival, represent an expenditure of personal time for an already overburdened and discouraged group of individuals.

Administrators also repeated negative effects from reduced classified help. However, they cited most often cuts in clerical help. Unlike educators working in schools, those in central offices tend to share their work place with fewer people, primarily other adults. For them, getting reports typed and correspondence out on time is a far greater problem than removing trash from the floor.



Question 2. In your opinion, where, if anywhere, have there been changes this year in the resources that help you in your job? We're thinking of resources like people, programs, supplies, equipment, and so on.

Total San Jose school sample 1978-1979 (indicates responses of 5% and above)

Perceived Changes
Calfee/Pessirilo-Jurisic
10/79

— Negative effects
o Neutral effects
+ Positive effects

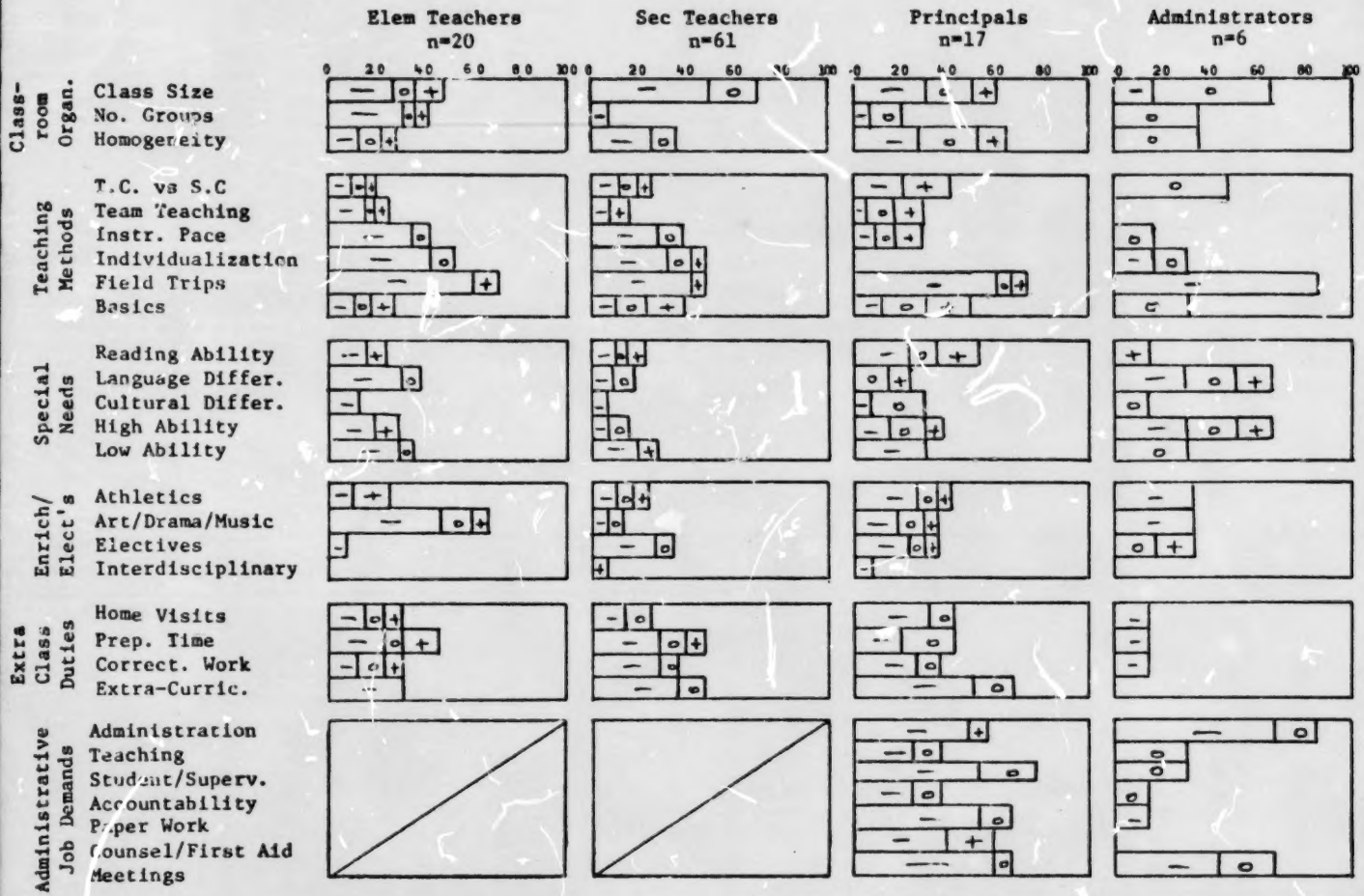
With respect to other resource areas, 64 percent of the sample mentioned the elimination of summer programs, and 46 percent mentioned inservice training programs. A small percentage of teachers mentioned no change for the latter because they claimed that inservice programs "never functioned well anyway."

The large response for summer programs needs some explanation. Responses to Questions 2 through 5 were obtained in three ways: (a) by asking a general question, (b) by asking specific probe questions, and (c) by presenting a recognition list of items to the interviewee. All but one of the individuals mentioning a change in summer programs did so only when they saw it on the final recognition list. Although educators were not happy about the elimination of summer programs, they were too busy coping with other, more immediate matters to worry about summer.

More than a third of the respondents mentioned a reduction in paper and pencil supplies, which was attributed to declining funds. The only change perceived in ancillary services was reduced parent participation in the elementary schools.

Question 3. This year, compared with last, what changes have occurred in your instructional program (and the demands of your job), and how are these related to changes in resources and services?

The change mentioned most often (see page 14) was the reduction or elimination of field trips (53%). This was mentioned, however, only during the recognition presentation.



Question 3. This year, compared with last, what changes have occurred in your instructional program (and the demands of your job), and how are these related to changes in resources and services?

Total San Jose school sample 1978-1979 (indicates response rate of 5% and above)

Perceived Changes
Calfee/Pensirilo-Jurisic
10/79

– Negative effects
o Neutral effects
+ Positive effects

Apart from field trips, the changes perceived most often by each group were as follows:

Elementary Teachers	Secondary Teachers
Declining emphasis on art, drama, and music	Increasing class size with less individualization
Principals	**Administrators**
Declining staff participation in extra-curricular activities	No additional changes were perceived

This list might be criticized as arbitrary since the difference between most important and next most important choices sometimes reflects only a few responses. We think that the list does offer insight into the specific concerns of each group.

The observed variations among groups are probably best interpreted as differences in perspective. A common denominator for teachers and principals is clearly a preoccupation with the emphasis on basic skills, with mandated special needs, and with the current de-emphasis on areas of enrichment or "extras." They see the instructional program becoming narrower and more sterile. Administrators, on the other hand, are responding to changes in the official programs for instruction, and more often perceived no major changes at this level.

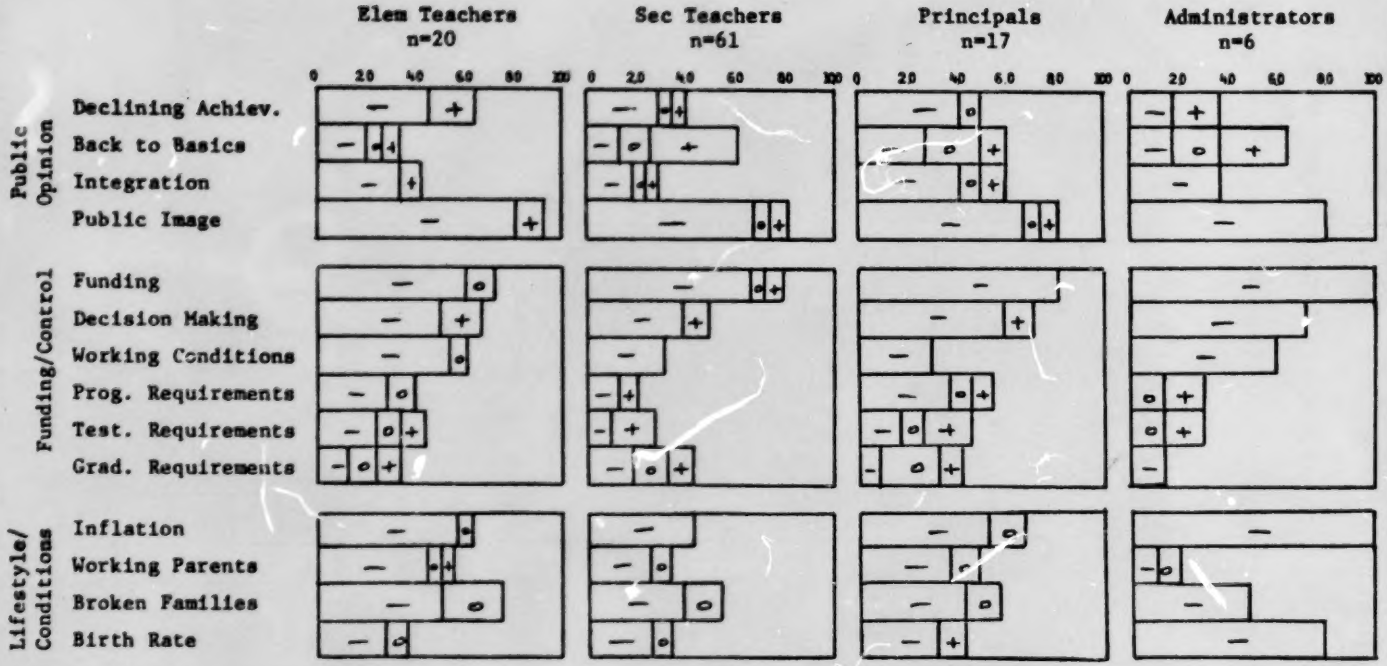
In addition to changes in instructional programs, principals and administrators were also asked about perceived changes in job demands. Both groups mentioned that more of their time was spent in meetings, and that cutbacks in funds and personnel obliged them to assume additional administrative responsibilities.

When we examine responses to Question 3, compared with the previous two questions, two findings emerge: (a) there were fewer responses to the

general question, and (b) a higher percentage of responses indicated no change or neutral change. One gets the feeling that, despite the loss of resources mentioned in Question 2, educators are trying to get on with the business of educating students pretty much as they have in the past.

Question 4. Until now we've been focusing on the classroom. Taking a broader perspective, what have been the major events in the state, the nation, or your district that have had an impact on your school and classroom? By events we mean such things as public opinion, funding and control of education, changes in living conditions and lifestyle, and so on.

Educators attributed primary impact on schools and classrooms to negative public opinion (78%) and reductions in funding due to Proposition 13 (72%). Since these responses represent a general consensus (see page 17), and since the other frequently mentioned areas--inflation (50%), and focus of decision-making (47%)--are closely related to the first two, it seems worthwhile to explore the reasons for these responses. By and large, educators perceived at least some connection between negative public opinion and the statewide salary freeze. The salary freeze represented a violation of contract for teachers, and it is not surprising, given the cries about declining achievement and back-to-basics, that the freeze was viewed as a general depreciation of their position. It also symbolized a move away from local decision-making to a more centralized system. Apart from feelings of anger and indignation, the salary freeze also hurt pocketbooks. This was a time of inflation, and the loss of promised raises meant economic struggle for many. The combined effects of the freeze led to a temporary work slowdown, which, in turn, had a direct impact of the functioning of schools. Reductions



Question 4. Until now, we've been focusing on the classroom. Taking a broader perspective, what have been the major events in the state, the nation, or your district that have had an impact on your school and classroom? By events, we mean such things as public opinion, funding and control of education, changes in living conditions and lifestyle, and so on.

Total San Jose school sample 1978-1979 (indicates responses 5% and above)

Perceived Changes
Calfee/Pessirilo-Jurisic
10/79

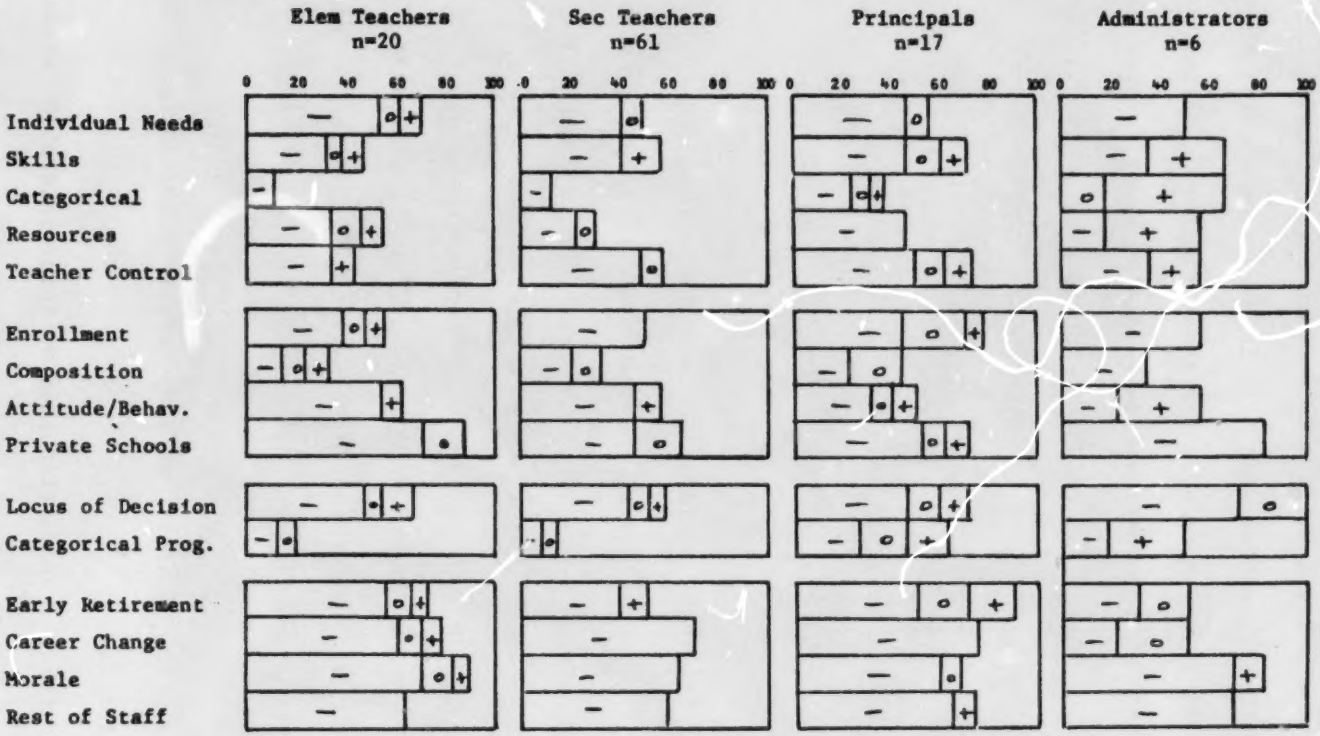
− Negative effects
o Neutral effects
+ Positive effects

in funding also led to a hiring freeze which was another source of difficulty for schools and classrooms. The inability to replace staff, coupled with cuts in classified personnel, meant a reduction in human resources (mentioned in Questions 1 and 2) and more work for those remaining (larger classes, additional duties--Questions 1 and 3). It also meant intense feelings of job insecurity for many. The perceived impact of reduced funding and negative public opinion, then, can be summed up as "an increase in job demands in the face of diminishing job rewards."

Question 5. Finally, what do you think may be the long-range effects of all the things we've been talking about--on you, on the school, on the students, . . .?

Educators were generally not optimistic about the future. They were particularly concerned about the effects of continuing job dissatisfaction and the public's growing impatience with public education (see page 19). Sixty-seven percent felt that declining morale would lead educators to seek other careers. They also felt that while greater numbers would try to leave the teaching professions, fewer would try to enter. Sixty-three percent predicted that the search for career alternatives would alter the composition of future teaching staffs. The majority predicted that staffs would decrease in size and increase in age. Some predicted that the survivors would be less qualified, while the more optimistic predicted that they would be more dedicated.

One additional and related projection made by interviewees concerning the effects of continuing job dissatisfaction was a rise in early retirement (26%). Whereas all groups concurred in predictions concerning morale, staff composition, and early retirement, predictions of career change were restricted to educators working in the schools.



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Total San Jose school sample 1978-1979 (indicates responses 5% and above)

− Negative effects
o Neutral effects
+ Positive effects

Interviewees were also concerned about the probable exodus of students from public to private schools in the event of a voucher system (57%). They felt that, given the possibility of the voucher, increasing numbers of families unhappy with the results of public education would enroll their children in private schools. The general consensus was that such a move would have disastrous consequences for public schools, which would become schools for the poor and the less able students, who would be rejected by private schools.

Other predictions made by interviewees were a continuing decline in school enrollment (46%), less teacher control over classroom decisions about what would be taught and how it would be taught (45%), reduced attention to students' individual needs and a corresponding increase in student disruptiveness (44%), and increasingly greater centralization of education (43%). All in all, the picture was rather bleak.

Summary and Conclusions

We interviewed 104 educators in the San Jose Unified School District about changes they had perceived in California education during the past year. Our sample was far from random, either in selection of the district, the schools, or the individuals who were willing to participate. We are not sure about the extent to which the results are generalizable to other districts or to other points in time. The trends in the data do fit with the results reported in newspapers and other anecdotal sources.

Major changes reported by the interviewees included a decline in resources, particularly human resources, and increased job demands on those remaining. Educators felt that they were working harder than ever, under worsening conditions and receiving fewer rewards--both psychological and financial. Major responsibility for these changes was attributed to the

reduction in funding resulting from Proposition 13, and to the public's growing dissatisfaction with public education. Interviewees predicted that the situation would probably get worse in the immediate future as increasing numbers of educators turned to other careers and students turned to private schools.

Certain findings do offer room for hope, however. Despite reductions in resources, educators perceived no major changes in classroom instruction. Also, while most predictions for the immediate future were grim, the majority were conditional (". . . if . . . then . . .") and at least some interviewees felt optimistic that "after things get worse, they should get better."

Is there justification for such optimism? Hoban (1979) has surveyed the smatterings of information available about the impact of Proposition 13 at the local school level. By and large, his findings are close to our own--the situation does not look bad from a distance, but the closer one moves to the classroom, the more problems one perceives. A special poll commissioned by the Education Commission of the States (Education Finance Center, 1979) found more than half the sample expressing the opinion that California schools are doing a good job; the same poll showed that the majority of the sample believed that the schools were unaffected by the tax limitation measure, and perhaps were even better off.

The Gallup Poll for Phi Delta Kappan (Gallup, 1979) on public attitudes toward education reveals that the schools are still receiving a passing grade (B-), but that the level of confidence has declined noticeably over the past five years. The reasons for the lack of trust are not clear--it may be, as Atkin (1979) has suggested, that the causes of dissatisfaction and frustration transcend the school and reflect broader strains in the society. Nonetheless, to the extent that the perceptions of our sample are

shared by other educators, and to the extent that perceptions lead to action, we think there is cause for concern that many of the better teachers and administrators will soon desert public education, because they see no opportunity in the future to realize the professional and personal goals that motivated them to enter education. At the very least, this concern would seem to justify a comprehensive and continuing effort to monitor the perceptions and plans of California teachers and school-level administrators. Without such evidence, citizens will be uninformed and unable to anticipate the impact of voter initiatives and other legislative and judiciary actions. For instance, it would be helpful to have information readily available at the State level about questions like the following:

- How many teachers are leaving the profession each year?
- What are the experience and specialization of those who are leaving?
- What are the patterns of intradistrict transfer? How many administrators have returned to classroom teaching? How many secondary teachers are in elementary classes? And so on?
- What are the career plans of teachers and administrators?

We think that the public and policy makers need to know the status of the education profession in order to make informed decisions, and to vote on issues like the Jarvis initiative. We have found it difficult to obtain relevant data.

Public education in California is an estimated $9 billion operation, with approximately 372,000 full-time-equivalent employees, serving 4.6 million constituents. It is folly to allow an investment of this magni-

tude to become endangered because relevant information is lacking. The greatest peril to California schools today may be that we do not know the extent to which they are in peril.

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